

LITTLE SINS,

A DIALOGUE.

TO WHICH IS ADDED, AN ABSTRACT

OF AN

INTERESTING CONVERSATION.



PHILADELPHIA :

**PUBLISHED BY THE TRACT ASSOCIATION OF FRIENDS,
AND TO BE HAD AT THEIR DEPOSITORY,
No. 84, MULBERRY STREET.**

No. 12.

LITTLE SINS.

William. My good neighbour, I have been long used to regard you as a conscientious man; and on many occasions have beheld with pleasure the influence of the fear of God to preserve you from corrupt practices, which too much prevail, and to lead you to attend to duties, which are too much neglected.

Robert. You alarm me, William;—surely, I have not given you occasion to change your opinion of me.

William. No; I still think of you with the respect, which I have been used to feel; I should be uncharitable and unjust, if I did not. But my friendship leads me to say, that I have frequently witnessed in you,—and of late more than in time past,—a nearer approach to the ways of wicked men than a Christian ought to venture upon.

Robert. I believe that what you say is with a friendly spirit; in that spirit be a little more particular.

William. You abhor swearing; but I have heard you mention the name of God lightly. You reverence the Scriptures; but I have witnessed instances of your using their awful or affecting words to convey a joke, and to raise merriment. You would not defraud your neighbours; but I have been grieved to observe you taking advantage of their ignorance, or of their readiness to believe and trust you. Your heart is kind, and your activity in doing good, according to your small means, has often made me admire you; yet I have noticed that it must be in your own way, that there are distresses, of which you seem to have little feeling, and schemes of usefulness, which you regard with indifference. Your common government of your own spirit might serve as a pattern; yet I have seen you too soon and too violently angry. You are not a glutton nor a drunkard; but you sometimes take more than is good for body or mind. You, in general, deserve to be esteemed a patient, contented man; you can even cheerfully enjoy your humble station; yet on some occasions you indulge in fretfulness, and seem to think that you could have done better for yourself than God does for you.

Robert. Enough, enough, William. I now understand what you mean; and I own that your remarks are not without ground. But do you not judge these *little sins* too severely? Would you condemn a man for the infirmities of his nature; for failings, which, with our powers and in our condition, we can hardly avoid? Is the great Governor of the world really offended with a few trifling liberties; or will he rigorously visit small or occasional omissions of duty? Will he make no account of the instances, in which we truly fear and love, honour and obey him? Will he exact the whole debt, which we owe him, because we do not pay him the uttermost farthing?

William. My good friend, it is the last thing, which I would

give occasion to be laid to my charge, that I undervalue the mercy of God, or that I wish to shake your reliance on this mercy. But I must admonish you, that you have now joined together words, between which there can be no agreement. There is no such thing as a little sin. When we think or talk of breaking the laws of God, as a matter of no concern, or of inconsiderable moment, our thoughts and our words are gross and dangerous absurdities. With more reason might we talk of trifling earthquakes, or of harmless poisons.

Robert. What say you, are there no little sins? Does not our Lord speak of the least of the divine commands? Is it not the fixed law of God, that as a man soweth so he shall also reap? And can you imagine that there is no difference between the offences, which men commit; and that the Judge will punish alike all wicked indulgences, and all neglects of duty and service?

William. I imagine no such thing. I have no doubt that there are different degrees of sin, guilt, and punishment. But though one sin is undoubtedly little compared with another, no sin is little in itself, none insignificant, none that should not be accounted a fit cause of regret and fear. Nor do your little sins, as you call them, always give the least occasion for remorse, when they are committed, and for apprehension in looking forward to expected dangers.

Robert. If, as you allow, our Governor and Judge makes a difference between the evil principles and practices of men; what reason can there be to insist as earnestly upon godly sorrow and watchfulness in my case, as in that of a thief or a murderer?

William. One reason is, that by sins, 'miscalled little ones,' we as much break the laws, and trample upon the authority of God, as by grosser offences. We plead that they are indifferent matters, or things of small moment, in which we indulge contrary to the divine rule. Can any thing, which God commands, be a matter of indifference? Can aught, which he forbids, be a thing of light concern? If these be matters taken into his government, and regulated by his laws, does not this render them alike binding and alike momentous? Is it not the same divine rule, which says, "thou shalt not steal," which says also, "thou shalt not covet?" Does not the same authority, which proclaims, "thou shalt not kill," with equal plainness declare, "thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart?" Are not the least of these commandments given in exactly the same decided and solemn manner as the greater? Is it not the will of Him, who governs us, that he be as fully obeyed in one point as in the other? For what purpose but for this, could he think of laying these orders before us? What opinions must we have of the Majesty in the heavens, when his plain and acknowledged commands cannot restrain us from transgressions, because we foolishly reckon them among the least?

Robert. I still know not how to admit that he, who speaks lightly of his Maker, as surely takes his name in vain as the man that swears falsely; or that covetous thoughts show the same disregard to the divine rule as taking what is another man's: or that malicious desires mark an equal contempt of the divine authority with shedding the blood of my neighbour.

William. I am sorry, if I fail to convince you. I cannot make my meaning plainer; though I might add to the weight of the argument. You pretend to obey God; you are practically obedient in great points; in points, which you esteem little ones, you resist, and would be held guiltless. You profess to consider certain sacrifices as of small moment, and yet you refuse to offer them at the demand of your God. Base and hard must be the heart, which refuses to a Father, as well as a Sovereign, certain marks of duty, while at the same time it accounts them trifling. Poor must be the pretences to sincerity and zeal in higher services, which are made amidst such disobedience.

Robert. But if I break the commandments of God by little sins as surely as by great ones, I must still think that they do not equally corrupt my heart, and stain my way of life; that they do not in the same measure load my conscience with guilt, and make me fit for condemnation. You allow that one offence is more base, more impious, more injurious, than another. If so, the greater the crime, the greater appear to me the corruption, the guilt, and the danger.

William. True; if it were only one indulgence of covetous desire, for instance, that is to be weighed against a single fraud, there is no question which would weigh the heavier. But great crimes seldom occur; little sins frequently. Great crimes are commonly the consequence of strong temptations; small ones are often ventured upon almost without temptation. It is their number, their frequency, their familiarity, which join to show what they really are.

As I intended to converse with you on this subject, I put a book into my pocket, from which I will, with your leave, read what seems to me a striking and convincing passage.—“To use false weights and a deceitful balance is as criminal as a direct act of theft. He who defrauds his neighbour daily in the course of his business, is a greater sinner before God, and a worse member of society, than he who once robs upon the highway. The frequency of these little sins makes the guilt great, and the danger extreme. The constant operation of evil deeds impairs the strength of the soul, and shakes the foundation, on which virtue rests. These little sins, increasing by indulgence, blast wherever they come; by degrees they make the spiritual life decay; they lay waste the new creation and turn the intellectual world into a chaos, without form and void

of order. And yet we are not on our guard against them. It fares with us as it did with the Israelites of old; we tremble more at one Goliath than at the whole army of the Philistines. One gross scandalous sin makes us start back; and yet we venture on the guilt of numberless smaller sins, without hesitation or remorse. What signifies it, whether you die of many small wounds, or by one great wound? What difference does it make, whether the devouring fire be kindled by many sparks, or by one firebrand? When God shall reckon up against you, at the great day, the many thousand malicious thoughts, slanderous words, petty oaths, deceits and falsehoods, that you have been guilty of, the account will be as dreadful, and the wrath as insupportable, as if atrocious crimes had stood upon the list."

Robert. I am no judge of fine writing, but these seem to me strong and eloquent words. Perhaps I might understand them better, if I could read them with care. But if I am not mistaken, their chief meaning is, that many little sins, committed as they usually are for a length of time, are as bad as a few heinous offences. Of this I am half convinced.

William. I wish, Robert, you were quite convinced; for it is, I believe, a most serious truth. You may look over the passage at your leisure, and read the rest of the discourse. When you read it, I beseech you to attend carefully to what the writer further advances,—that these little offences, rendering life one course of transgression, make the conviction and conversion of the soul exceedingly difficult, almost impossible.

"Often, says he, upon the commission of a gross sin, a sober interval succeeds; serious reflection has its hour; sorrow and contrition of heart take their turn; then is the crisis of a man's character; and many, improving this favourable opportunity, have risen the greater from their fall. But if these little sins then come in; if, between the commission of one gross sin and another, there be a constant neglect of God, a hardness of heart, a vanity of imagination, and unfruitfulness of life; you still add to the measure of guilt, and treasure up to yourselves wrath against the day of wrath. Such little sins fill up all the void spaces; every avenue by which the heart might be reached, is closed; and life becomes an unbroken chain of iniquity. Thus are men rendered incapable of reformation, and put themselves, as far as they can, out of the reach of divine grace."

Robert. I own that I have felt uneasy on account of these little sins; but this uneasiness has never been violent, and it has soon passed away. I have persuaded myself, indeed, that there was no occasion for any great trouble on their account. My conscience now speaks to me on the subject with more alarm than usual. Yet I wish you to proceed, and to keep back nothing which you intended to say.

William. My only remaining wish was, with my helper, as

you call this book, to represent to you, how one transgression leads on to more; how great offences naturally appear less heinous to every one, who has been long used to transgress in smaller points.

Robert. This is what I have been expecting. Often have I heard, how sin leads to greater sin; and I thought you would bring it forward, to strengthen what you have been saying. But I am not so fully satisfied as you seem to be, that it is always true. My own state is, if I am not greatly mistaken, an evidence against its truth. My little sins have not yet led me far in the paths of the destroyer, and I trust they never will. If in this respect I boast, the testimony, with which you begun the conversation, may serve to show that my boasting is not entirely without ground.

William. What I said, Robert, of my hope that the fear of God prevailed in you, and of your consequent freedom from many prevailing corruptions, and your performance of some neglected duties, I said sincerely, and deliberately. Do not forget what I added, that according to my judgment, some of your faults were growing upon you. And however you may have been hitherto preserved from great offences, or however light you may make of the truth as applied to your own case, no truth is clearer than that sin leads to greater sin, and no truth speaks more fearfully to one, who comforts himself with the thought that his are little sins. When a man has, for some vain purpose or other wandered into the way of evil, he often wants the aid of other transgressions in order to get any thing by his first false step. He, who has lightly departed from the truth, maintains what he has advanced by new and deliberate falsehoods. The fraudulent are driven to many shifts, and most of them wicked ones, so to support their character as to render their frauds of any avail. The heart, once corrupted, is by degrees wrought upon more and more easily; the conscience becomes seared; and sins, which to a beginner would have appeared horrible, seem nothing to one trained to evil. Truly is it said in the Apocrypha,—“he that contemneth small things shall fall by little and little.”

“Come not then, says the book in my hand, near the territories of perdition. Stand back, and survey the torrent, which is now so mighty and overflowing that it deluges the land; and you will find it to proceed from a small and contemptible brook. Examine the conflagration, that has laid a city in ashes, and you will find it to arise from a single spark.”

Robert. You have not spared me, William; but as I still believe that you have spoken as a true friend, I thank you. Forgive me, if I have not heard you as I ought. You have made an impression, which I promise you I will endeavour not to lose.

(The quotations, and some other hints, from a sermon by I. Logan.)

Abstract of an interesting conversation between a Roman Catholic clergyman, and a person who had been in an extensive line of business; but having retired from it, and wanting that occupation which used to engage his attention, had got into an uncomfortable and dissatisfied state of mind, very trying to himself and others.

THE clergyman is a man, who to a highly cultivated mind, unites a strong and comprehensive understanding: though a naturally volatile and susceptible disposition, had made him for years the sport of his feelings. He was often favoured with strong desires after the best things, and then, the charms of society, and the example of others, led him off from what he knew and felt to be right: but for several years he has been a changed character, withdrawing himself very much from the world, and devoting a considerable portion of his time to retirement and meditation. Very frequent intercourse with the person above named, (whom we shall call M. R.) and who entertained the highest opinion of his talents and good qualities, permitted a freedom of conversation on his part, that would scarcely have been brooked from any other individual; and one evening, on incidentally speaking of a person of eighty-four, who for many years had been deprived of sight, and was labouring under a complication of most painful disorders, yet was one of the happiest men he knew—frequently acknowledging the many blessings he possessed, in the beautiful language of the Psalmist—M. R. remarked, that, “to have attained to such a state, and with such infirmities, he must possess naturally a happy and placid temper:”—“Quite the contrary,” replied the clergyman, “his natural temper was irascible and violent.”—M. R.—“Then what effected the wonderful change?”—Clergyman, “Religion.”—M. R.—“Religion may do much, but if the natural temper is not good, there will be moments when the mind is thrown off its guard, and the dispositions nature has given, will show themselves: we may reason—we may feel the folly of giving way to irritation; yet when vexations arise, who will venture to say, that with philosophic calmness he can stand his ground?”—Clergyman—“you are going, my dear sir, from our subject: I was not speaking of either reason or philosophy, for these I know can do little; it is RELIGION alone that can control the passions, subdue the temper, and infuse into the soul tranquillity and peace.” M. R.—“Well, putting philosophy and reasoning out of the question, yet I cannot allow that the religious character can so far get above the weaknesses of his nature, that he will not at times feel the infirmities, the passions, and the irritations that are attached to it; you cannot think otherwise.” Clergyman—“My dear friend, I do think otherwise; and if you will give me a patient hearing, I will explain to you what I mean, I may say, the *convictions* of my soul, on a subject of the first importance: I mean the regeneration of the human heart: man is by nature, the most irritable and the most selfish of all animals; the light of his natural reason is unable to overcome his evil propensities; and He who created him (with a condescension and love that must ever call forth our gratitude and praise,) has planted, or put into his heart, a heavenly principle; an emanation of light from His own Divine nature, for him to profit withal: this Divine principle, which we term the grace of God, becomes more and more clear as it is attended to; and it subdues, cleanses, and I may say consumes, all that is of an earthly, selfish, and sordid nature; a soul given up to its influence undergoes a complete change; a new birth is experienced; old attachments are done away; new affections, new desires spring up; the spiritual understanding is illuminated; it sees the world in its true

colours, and acknowledges the emptiness and vanity of all created things." M. R.—"Excuse me for interrupting you, but just let me ask, if you believe man can attain perfection whilst in a state of mutability?" Clergyman—"Perfection comprehends *every thing*; and I dare not venture to make use of so strong a word; but it is my full belief, that by giving way to this spiritual Teacher, by attending to its dictates, its admonitions and reproofs, the soul undergoes such a complete change, that whilst in the body, it is permitted to hold a sweet and intimate communion with its Maker; and when its frail tabernacle is dissolved, it is united to the fountain of all good, in a union never to be broken." M. R.—"Then it is your opinion, that none but purified spirits of this high order, are allowed an entrance into heaven; and that the great bulk of mankind are shut out of it." Clergyman—"Far be it from me to set limits to the mercy of the Almighty; it is a subject I do not feel at liberty at present to enter upon; but let me return to our subject, and ask if you are convinced, that a gracious God has not left man to be the sport of his wayward passions; but has given him a counteracting principle sufficiently powerful to overcome them?" M. R.—"Your reasoning appears so clear and conclusive, that I have nothing more to say; only, that to arrive at this state must be a most difficult, though a most desirable attainment." Clergyman—"Oh, my friend! that I may not only convince your judgment; but that, through infinite goodness, you may experimentally know and acknowledge, the truth of what I have asserted, is my fervent wish! and believe me, the attainment is not so difficult as you imagine—the work is not left to our feeble powers; we have but to co-operate with this Divine principle; to desire with our whole hearts this purifying change; to be willing to feel as passive clay in the hands of the mighty Potter: and we shall be led, step by step, till this supernatural regeneration is effected. I know the state of your mind perfectly; surrounded with comforts and blessings, you are like a man in a fever, restless and irritable; you turn from side to side, and find no permanent rest: trifles discompose you; little evils are magnified into great ones; and, with a mind of more comprehension, intellect, and energy, than generally falls to the lot of man, you fritter away your moments without utility, and without pleasure. Let me conjure you, as you wish for happiness, to reflect upon your situation, to search after this Divine light within you, to attend to its teachings, and expect no happiness but through and by it. I can feelingly speak to you; and I do solemnly declare, that after pursuing happiness for years, in the schools of the learned, in the philosophy of ages, and in the pleasures of the world—I found her not, till I became acquainted with this pure and vital principle. Let me entreat that you will often retire into inward silence, and under a deep sense of your own weakness, sit as it were at the feet of Jesus. You will find a strength given you, a consolation poured into your soul, that at present you have no idea of. Those irritable and restless feelings will be overcome; every care will be diminished; every blessing will be doubled to you; and the evening of your days will close in peace and hope."—[*Occasional Reflections.*]